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### SINO-SOVIET DETENTE: NEW CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN INTERESTS IN ASIA

by

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19 ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) This report analyzes the intensifying challenges that Sino-Soviet detente poses for American interests and policies in the Asia-Pacific. It addresses and evaluates Soviet President Gorbachev's successful efforts at making China the centerpiece of his Asian strategy. Although both Beijing and Moscow disingenuously argue that Sino-Soviet detente will not affect their relations with the U.S., this report indicates that substantial harm has already occurred to U.S. interests in Asia as a result of Soviet and Chinese rapprochement. The report examines the widening and deepening range of Sino-Soviet political and economic ties, and states that prospective cooperative military exchanges between the two Asian communist states must now be considered likely. This assessment of Sino-Soviet detente given in this report indicates that the balance of power may be shifting in Asia in ways unfavorable to the U.S. Finally, the report calls for a recognition by U.S. decision-makers that the apparent anti-Soviet coalition forged by the U.S. in Asia, consisting of the U.S., Japan, and China, has now been broken. Not only is this part of the shift in the balance of power, but Sino-Soviet detente provides the Soviet Union with a freedom it has not enjoyed for decades to conduct its Asia-Pacific policy.				
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## SINO-SOVIET DETENTE: NEW CHALLENGE FOR AMERICAN INTERESTS IN ASIA<sup>1</sup>

Mikhail Gorbachev has been in power for nearly four years and during that time the West has come to accept a dazzling array of bold policy initiatives and unorthodox proposals from Moscow covering the gamut from arms control to regional conflicts. The sweep of *glasnost* and *perestroika* have deeply and fundamentally altered the temper of international relations.

Indeed the very rapidity with which the Soviet Union has changed the political and strategic configuration of global politics has generated a troubling lack of agreement among Western policy-makers over the nature and direction of an appropriate response to these Soviet initiatives. Perhaps a consensus is emerging, however, that both historic new opportunities and challenges are at hand for East-West relations. In particular, Soviet policy activism may have opened exciting new realms for cooperative ventures in reducing threats to peace at both the regional and global levels. Nevertheless, despite fervent hopes for an enduring reduction in hostilities, it is perhaps only prudent for policy-makers to respond cautiously to the Soviet Union, recognizing that the Soviet Union remains a heavily armed military power with unsettled internal politics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. I would like to thank the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School's Research Council for its support in preparation of this paper. The views expressed are the author's and do not represent the position of the Department of the Navy or the U.S. Government.

<sup>2</sup>. The call for a cautious rather than euphoric American response to President Gorbachev's proposals is widely found within diverse circles of governmental decision-makers, academic analysts and media commentators. For example, Secretary of State James Baker recommends a measured appraisal and cautious assessment of Soviet proposals (*New York Times*, January 18, 1989) as does Senator Bill Bradley (*Christian Science Monitor*, February 15, 1989). While noted *New York Times* commentator, A.M. Rosenthal has recommended strengthening international political agreements with the Soviet Union, he feels the U.S. should forego any substantial American economic assistance to that country. Rosenthal argues that much more substantive political changes are required in the Soviet Union and that "one day we may well want to use capitalist economic power—to

At this critical stage in evolving superpower relations, careful assessments are needed of the implications of recent Soviet foreign policy initiatives for Western security. These assessments are useful for indicating to Western policy-makers the most significant avenues for mutually beneficial relations with the Soviets—and for indicating those arenas where rivalry and competition remain primary. As Brent Scowcroft, President Bush's national security advisor, recently remarked, notwithstanding hopes to the contrary, "the Cold War is not over" therefore prudence remains vital.<sup>3</sup>

Although the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a remarkable expansion of Soviet global power, events in the 1980s indicate that Soviet international success was secured at expense of internal deterioration. Soviet decision-makers have now apparently concluded that the status of the Soviet Union as a global military superpower is in jeopardy if the stagnation, indeed

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support a change (in the Soviet Union) to a free society. But (recent change in the Soviet Union) is just the first act of a new Soviet drama. There is time to see it play out awhile...." (*New York Times*, February 17, 1989). An additional warning comes from the well-known strategic and Soviet affairs specialist, Edward Luttwak, that recent internal changes in the Soviet Union are "entirely reversible." Indeed Professor Luttwak argues that the new Soviet foreign policy of conciliatory gestures, announced troop withdrawals, disengagements from regional conflicts and new flexibility in arms control "all remain quickly reversible." For a recent statement of his views, see *New York Times*, February 7, 1989.

<sup>3</sup>. Mr. Scowcroft also indicated that the Bush Administration views Gorbachev's "peace offensive" as partly inspired by a desire to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies. See *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1989.

contraction of the domestic economy is not reversed.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze recently stated, in remarks generally critical of the military, that the armed forces can only be as strong as the state of the economy and science permit.<sup>5</sup> Yet the centralized Soviet economy is a model of inefficiency, suffering not only low productivity and misplaced investments but also significant inflation and chronically large budget deficits, deficits proportionately much larger than those in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Key Soviet officials are in fact making a direct connection between radical internal domestic changes and successful external policies. Well over three years ago, Shevardnadze gave some indication of new Soviet thinking when he stated that “the foreign policy of any state is inseparably linked to its internal affairs” and that to implement perestroika at home, “the Soviet Union

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<sup>4</sup>. In 1987 two Soviet economists suggested that per capita output was slightly lower in the mid-1980s than it had been a decade earlier. Senior officials have subsequently indicated an even bleaker situation. Abel Aganbegyan, one of Gorbachev's top advisors, has stated that Soviet national income had virtually no growth between 1981-1985, implying a per capita decline of almost 1% per year (*New York Times*, November 23, 1988). These figures stand in contrast to more optimistic CIA estimates which had suggested that the Soviet economy grew by 2% per year since the 1970s. The extent of the Soviet economic malaise remains a highly controversial topic among Western analysts. If the more pessimistic view is also a more accurate assessment of Soviet economic decline then it suggests that military expenditures have placed a much heavier burden on the Soviet economy than generally realized. In other words, the Soviet Union would be in a weaker negotiating position in arms talks with the U.S. than many believe. On the other hand, senior Soviet officials may have been excessively pessimistic in an attempt to further discredit Gorbachev's predecessors and thus to that extent may exaggerate the extent of the Soviet decline.

<sup>5</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 3, 1989.

<sup>6</sup>. *New York Times*, January 26, 1989. Although Western analysts remain uncertain, Gorbachev may have won the support of the Soviet military on the need for revitalizing the Soviet economy through a reallocation of resources from the defense to civilian sectors. This reasoning is congruent with recent Gorbachev statements announcing a 14.2% reduction in the defense budget and a 19.5% decline in the production of military equipment. (*Christian Science Monitor*, February 3, 1989).



needs a durable peace.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the domestic and foreign policies of the Soviet Union are now viewed as two separate but intersecting realms: a prime purpose of domestic economic reform is the strengthening of Soviet global capability while concurrently a shift in the instruments of foreign policy to political and diplomatic tools is required to reduce the costs associated with the Soviet’s enduring global rivalry with the United States. In Soviet calculations domestic reform and foreign policy success are thus part of the same policy continuum—external peace is needed to bring about domestic change while domestic change is required to enhance Soviet capabilities in meeting foreign policy challenges.

The bleak assessment made by Soviet officials of the Soviet condition is perhaps indicated by the significant risks Moscow is assuming in its recent actions in Asia. Soviet troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan without having stabilized the regime in Kabul and the Soviets have been putting considerable pressure on Vietnam to withdraw from Kampuchea despite what some observers see as only the moderate success of Phnom Penh in meeting the challenge from the anti-government coalition.<sup>8</sup>

A common theme in these actions and assessments is the recognition by Soviet decision-makers of the need to craft and strengthen more than just the military instrument of foreign policy if Moscow is to compete successfully

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<sup>7</sup> Donald S. Zagoria, “Soviet-American Rivalry in Asia,” in Andrzej Korbonski and Francis Fukuyama, eds., *The Soviet Union and the Third World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987) p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> However, for a variety of reasons, some commentators now feel that it is unlikely that the anti-regime coalition, headed by Prince Sihanouk and including the internationally condemned Khmer Rouge, will triumph over the Vietnamese-installed Heng Samrin regime after the Vietnamese complete their withdrawal. (*Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1989.) Further discussion of the Kampuchean conflict is found on pp. 30-33 below.



politically (and militarily) with the United States.<sup>9</sup> Certainly it appears that the Soviet Union is actively attempting to narrow the gap which currently exists between Soviet *military* power and Soviet *political* influence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Asia-Pacific. Despite (indeed partly because of) an aggressive and broadly-based military buildup,<sup>10</sup> the Soviets are acutely aware that they have little political influence in the region and have neither participated in the “Pacific Century” nor shared in the economic and political dynamism of the region.<sup>11</sup> Eager to reverse this situation, President Gorbachev has injected a new dynamism in Soviet policy and has focussed

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<sup>9</sup>. Banning N. Garrett, “Gorbachev’s Reassessment of Soviet Security Needs: Implications for Northeast Asia,” (paper presented at Australian National University’s Conference on Security and Arms Control in the North Pacific, 12-14 August, 1987) p. 16. Garrett has argued that the Soviet Union is strengthening both its civilian and defense technological bases in order to undertake more effective competition with the United States in the 21st century.

<sup>10</sup>. David Winterford, *Assessing the Soviet Naval Build-up in Southeast Asia: Threats to Regional Security*, Naval Technical Report #NPS-56-88-024, September 1988.

<sup>11</sup>. There is little doubt that the Soviet Union wants to become a significant economic actor in the Asia-Pacific. Perhaps the most graphic *action* taken by Moscow to signal its determination occurred when the Soviets sent a delegation to the 1988 Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (PECC) seeking membership in that organization. (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 24, 1988) By simply attending the conference, Moscow had clearly revised its earlier dogmatic condemnation of a “Pacific Community” as nothing more nor less than a U.S-inspired military alliance directed against the Soviet Union. However, one difficulty confronting Moscow is that only about 4-5% of its total trade is with Pacific nations compared to at least 50% for most Pacific nations’ trading with others in the region.

several of his most stunning initiatives directly on Soviet relations with Asia.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to indicate several dimensions, goals and actions of recent Soviet policy in Asia, particularly Soviet policy toward China. One objective is an attempt to determine the degree to which present Soviet policy represents change or continuity with the past. This paper also seeks to indicate where U.S. interests in Asia may be facing new opportunities but also stark new challenges—challenges arising largely from the newly minted political coin that Moscow is successfully trading in Asia. Specifically, this paper argues that the more enduring challenge confronting the United States in Asia today may stem not from trade frictions but from detente between China and the Soviet Union. Overall, this paper attempts to indicate that the new Soviet political approach to the Asia-Pacific is both complicating the political environment for the United States and altering the threat perceptions among U.S. friends and allies in the region in ways which may harm the attainment of U.S. security goals.

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<sup>12</sup>. Gennady Gerasimov, Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman, recently stated that Soviet attention “is focussed on Asia . . . . China and Japan are the focus of our attention at the moment.” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1989.

It would not be unreasonable to argue that Soviet policy activism in Asia is the centerpiece of a set of processes at work which collectively amount to a challenge to the “old order” as we have known it. Although U.S. policy in Asia has been very successful in the 1980s, many of the factors that made U.S. policy effective are changing fairly rapidly and casting serious doubt that the U.S. will be as successful in the 1990s, for example, the growing protectionism in the U.S. threatens the prosperity that seemed all but assured for Asia; nationalism and anti-nuclear sentiment in the Pacific threatens to erode the American alliance and forward basing system in the region; and the conflicts and rivalries between communist states in Asia are beginning to weaken. See David Winterford, “Challenging the Old Order: Recent Political, Economic and Strategic Initiatives in the Asia-Pacific,” paper being presented at the forthcoming ASPAC '89 Conference, Honolulu, June 30-July 2, 1989.

The analysis of Soviet policy in Asia presented in this paper thus focuses on three issues: (1) the shifting balance in trilateral Sino-Soviet-American relations; (2) the impact of this shift on Soviet foreign policy in Asia, with a specific example drawn from Southeast Asia, the Kampuchean conflict; and (3) implications this analysis may have both for Asian decision-makers and for U.S. policy toward the region.

### I. Trilateral Relations: Sino-Soviet-American Ties

The fundamental assumption made in this analysis is that Soviet policy in Asia in general, and in Southeast Asia in particular, must be seen within the context of Soviet global foreign policy goals and priorities. In general, Soviet decision-makers do not demarcate either Asia or Asian sub-regions and fashion policies separate from broader geopolitical concerns. Indeed despite assurances from Gorbachev that Soviet foreign policy would not be dominated by the “American problem,” it seems that in its recent Asian initiatives the Soviet Union remains focussed on (1) challenging the US in Asia; (2) weakening US alliances in the region; and (3) encouraging nascent but developing sentiments of neutralism. In other words, Soviet foreign policy seems targeted at reducing if not containing American presence and influence in Asia.

A significant change may have occurred, however, in the means being used by the Soviet Union to contain the U.S.. Having reaped a bitter harvest from Afghanistan to Vietnam through the heavy-handed and expensive reliance on military power to accomplish goals, it now appears that the Soviets favor cheaper but possibly more effective tools for thwarting U.S. interests, namely, politics and diplomacy. Gorbachev’s “new thinking” may

well represent politics taking command over guns as the chief instrument in Soviet foreign policy. Indeed in remarks to the 27th Party Congress, Gorbachev appeared to revise Soviet positions on security and war when he stated: "Ensuring security is taking the form more and more of a political task and it can only be solved by political means."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed prior to Gorbachev's emergence as leader, there were already major signs that Moscow was reassessing domestic and foreign policies. This reassessment was prompted by several factors including (1) the adverse shift in the global balance of power, (2) Soviet foreign policy setbacks in Europe and the Third World, (3) the worsening of the domestic economic condition and, (4) the resurgence of American power.

Although Europe held promise of some foreign policy successes, particularly in West Germany, Soviet policy in Asia confronted cumulative barriers of resistance that in their sum amounted to a "spectacular failure" for Moscow.<sup>14</sup> Virtually all the essential trends in the region were negative for the Soviet Union including:

- the economic dynamism of Asia,
- the modernization of China,
- the Chinese barrier to Soviet expansion,
- the strengthening U.S.-Japanese ties,
- the fitful dialogue between North and South Korea,

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<sup>13</sup>. M.S. Gorbachev, "Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee delivered 25 February by M.S. Gorbachev, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee," Pravda, FBIS-Soviet Union, Party Congresses, February 26, 1987, pp. 1, 10. Cited in Garrett, "Gorbachev's Reassessment of Soviet Security Needs," p.17.

<sup>14</sup>. Robert A. Manning, *Asian Policy: The New Soviet Challenge in the Pacific* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1988).



- the coalescence of ASEAN with the remarkable economic surge in Southeast Asia, and
- the ability of the United States to affect a triumphant political and economic return to Asia after the military defeat in Indochina.

Many of these events were of course beyond the direct control of Moscow's global planners. However even those issues most susceptible to Soviet manipulation yielded a perversity which must have created rising resentments among decision-makers. Not only had communism apparently lost much of its appeal to Asian populations with the surging production of consumer goods and the spread of democratic values, the Soviets discovered they had not even been able to convert their awesome and expensively acquired military power into the more useable currency of political influence. Indeed the means Moscow had chosen to attain its foreign policy goals in the Asia-Pacific in the early to mid 1980s were so counterproductive that Western analysts should really have been more alert to the building pressures for change. Wherever Moscow turned there was fresh evidence that Soviet actions were themselves mainly responsible for rising anti-Soviet feeling in the region: the invasion of Afghanistan—and the signals Moscow sent that Soviet troops were on permanent deployment there; Soviet support for Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea; Soviet alienation of Japan over both the military buildup in and ownership of the Northern Islands; the enormous Soviet military might massed on the borders with China; and finally, the bitter confrontations within tangled Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese relations.

Surveying the catastrophe of Soviet relations in Asia, Gorbachev quickly saw his task to be extricating the Soviet Union from the impasse of the Brezhnev policies. The militarization of the Soviet domestic economy and the militarization of Soviet foreign policy had confirmed the views of Soviet neighbors and adversaries that, similar to most revolutionary states, the

Soviet Union has inherently expansionist tendencies. The evidence was there for all to see including planning for war in Europe, the military buildup in the Soviet Far East and the deployment of vast numbers of troops along the Sino-Soviet border. Believing in the march of global socialism, and heartened by the prospect of quick victories in the soft terrain of the Third World, the Soviets had plunged into Angola, Afghanistan, Ethiopia while supporting Vietnam in its occupation of Kampuchea, all of which took place within five years. However the result was not the anticipated victories but prolonged internal strife in each of these countries as the years stretched into a decade with each of them wracked by turmoil and war. Simply put, the militarization of Soviet foreign policy did not bring military victories. However, what it did bring was a great opportunity, which the United States seized, for the U.S. to mobilize an international coalition of states against the Soviet Union. In Asia, for reasons of size, geography, stature and interest, China was the apparent centerpiece of this U.S.-inspired coalition. For Gorbachev, successfully reversing these adverse trends thus meant making China the centerpiece of *his* policy for dealing with the “American problem” in Asia.

It is in this context of failed but costly actions that Gorbachev’s initiatives can be understood. Vast sums of Soviet national treasure had been expended for only meagre results, other than a bountiful harvest of global condemnation fully exploited by the United States. The challenge confronting Gorbachev was to devise new methods of achieving Soviet foreign policy objectives—and given the stagnation of the Soviet economy these methods had to be cheap. In other words, the challenge was to create new political and diplomatic means of accomplishing goals while holding military power in reserve. First, in terms of policy, this meant arms control

at both the nuclear and conventional levels. Rather than a crippling attempt to sustain ever-higher levels of parity with Moscow's chief adversary—the Brezhnev approach—Gorbachev advanced the concept of “reasonable sufficiency.” To the extent that reasonable sufficiency entails limiting defense spending, it becomes feasible only in the context of a continuing arms control process. Second, in terms of a political impact, arms control is a means of signalling Moscow's intention of defusing international resentment against the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Gorbachev's “new political thinking” is intended to facilitate collaboration in functional areas, such as control of nuclear weapons, and to portray the Soviet Union as a willing and cooperative partner in resolving international problems. Primary among these problems are the regional conflicts in the Third World, especially those in Afghanistan and Kampuchea.

For Gorbachev, these regional conflicts blocked crafting new approaches to handling the “American problem”—“how to contain the United States.” Since the United States had been successfully able to exploit these conflicts in forming anti-Soviet coalitions, Gorbachev faced a very acute dilemma—using cheaper and potentially more effective means of containing the U.S. would entail reducing global hostility toward the Soviet Union and that would mean addressing those conditions that gave rise to the international antipathy. In Asia, Gorbachev and his advisors knew they needed China to contain the US. Needing China more than China needs the Soviet Union

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<sup>15</sup>. Leszek Buszynski, “Gorbachev and Southeast Asia: Prospects for the 1990s” (paper presented at the Australian National University Conference on The Soviets in the Pacific in the 1990s, May 27, 1988) p. 3-4.



meant Moscow had to woo Beijing and ask Beijing to dance—the price of dancing with China in turn was (1) resolution of the Afghanistan and Kampuchean conflicts, and (2) de facto recognition of China's dominant position in Southeast Asia and acknowledgment of China's "global" power status.

Although negotiations between the Soviet Union and China on normalization of relations began in the 1970s only to be broken off as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently resumed in 1982, Gorbachev's initiatives significantly accelerated the normalization process. Especially noteworthy, his Vladivostok speech signalled that Moscow was now prepared to address the key issues fueling hostilities and blocking a rapprochement with China, namely, the ideological disputes and border disagreements between the two Asian powers, and Chinese fears of Soviet encirclement.

The reasons for Moscow's intense interest in much closer relations with Beijing are not hard to determine. First, for over a decade Moscow had feared that converging Sino-American threat perceptions would lead to a deepening strategic relationship if not a de facto military alliance. Second, China had skillfully played on these Soviet fears through its hyperbolic rhetoric which repeatedly called for a global united front against Soviet hegemonism. Finally, key decision-makers in Washington began to calculate the benefits of an apparent "China card" to be played in relations with the Soviets. Of course Soviet actions, especially the invasion of Afghanistan followed quickly by the alliance with Vietnam and support for that country's occupation of Kampuchea, only served to confirm the apparent usefulness of



joint Sino-American consultations and thereby in a circular fashion further heightened Soviet suspicions.

In other words, during the 1970s and early 1980s, Sino-American rapprochement rested on a similar strategic assessment. Both countries, for their own reasons, had cold relations with the Soviet Union and feared the Soviet Union. It is important to recall that China only turned to the United States because it felt *threatened* by the Soviet Union not because of any shared consensus on fundamental values. After the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, China needed a strong security partner to help deter the Soviet threat while domestic order was reestablished. In turn, many in the United States saw China as a counterweight to Soviet expansion in Asia and thus useful if not vital for containing Moscow's imperial pretensions. Although several analysts in the US warned against too close an embrace of Beijing, the policy debate was won by those who argued that Sino-Soviet relations had permanent structural weaknesses in the form of centuries of disputes fueled by a 4200 mile border.

Despite several attempts, Brezhnev was unable to secure rapprochement with China. Even after Mao's death and the eventual emergence of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, conditions were still not propitious for Sino-Soviet detente. Perhaps this is not too surprising since Deng had long warned of the Soviet threat and even today is reputed to be less friendly toward the Soviets than other Chinese leaders.<sup>16</sup> In any event, the task confronting Deng in the late 1970s was similar to that now facing Gorbachev, namely, the need to remedy stagnation in the economy, reduce hostility

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<sup>16</sup>. *New York Times*, February 2, 1989.

abroad, and end isolation from the main currents of international affairs. Interestingly, Deng's response was to accelerate domestic economic reform within the context of further association with the international system, especially the western economic and security alliance. Tilting toward the West provided China not only with capital, technology, and market access, but as important, it provided a security link just as the Soviet Union was reaching the zenith of its reach in the Third World.

Despite the notable pro-Taiwan sympathies of many in the new Administration, Sino-American detente survived the transition to the Reagan era and indeed eventually flourished under Reagan. In fact, the very success of the deepening set of relations between the US and China mirrored the deepening antagonism on the one hand between the US and the Soviet Union and on the other hand between China and the Soviet Union. Indeed, the successful isolation of Moscow—partly a result of the design of American and Chinese foreign policy and partly the result of aggressive Soviet actions in the Third World and Europe—set the conditions for the emergence of Gorbachev's "new thinking." In some ways, the episodic containment of the Soviet Union coupled with the internal deterioration of the Soviet economy within the context of rising external enmity toward Moscow all but compelled a radical shift in the means of achieving Soviet foreign policy.

Providentially for Gorbachev, Beijing had also concluded that the very success of Chinese relations with the United States made it possible, indeed desirable, to improve relations with Moscow. China became convinced that improving relations with the Soviet Union was essential if Beijing was to enhance its role in world affairs. At the same time, warmer ties with Moscow carried the prospect of greater leverage for China in dealing with

Washington. Thus at the 12th Congress of the CCP in September 1982, General Secretary Hu Yaobang stated China intended to follow an “independent foreign policy,” a declaration which effectively distanced China from the U.S. Shortly thereafter discussions resumed between the Soviet Union and China at the vice-foreign minister level. Trade ties strengthened and a variety of cultural, academic and technical links were revived after 20 years of atrophy.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed prior to a political rapprochement, Moscow and Beijing had concluded economic detente with fairly spectacular increases in trade volumes occurring in the early 1980s. From a modest base of \$300 million in 1982, bilateral Sino-Soviet trade grew to \$2 billion by 1985.<sup>18</sup> This economic base was capped with a five year \$14 billion trade agreement signed in 1985, three months after Gorbachev became General Secretary. In other words, *over four years ago it was becoming apparent that China's “tilted non-alignment” toward the West might well be ephemeral.* As it is, trade and economic ties between the two countries have continued to grow to the extent that the Soviet Union is now Beijing's fifth largest trading partner with bilateral trade expected to amount to \$2.8 billion for 1988.<sup>19</sup> As such, the Soviets have begun refurbishing outmoded Chinese factories that Moscow designed and equipped in the 1950s. Indeed Moscow has even offered to

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<sup>17</sup>. By 1989, wide-ranging Sino-Soviet cultural contacts were planned including the first tour of the Bolshoi Ballet to China in 30 years. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 8, 1989.

<sup>18</sup>. Manning, *Asian Policy*, p. 42.

<sup>19</sup>. *The Economist*, June 11, 1988.

construct nuclear power stations in China.<sup>20</sup> In a particularly interesting economic venture, a new railway (the third linking China and the Soviet Union) is expected to be completed in 1992. While this project has obvious utility in facilitating trade by substantially shortening the distance between Shanghai and the Soviet heartland, it is also indicative of the significant reduction in tensions that has already occurred in this strategic geographical area.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth noting several aspects of these developments for they indicate the seriousness of Soviet and Chinese intentions to normalize relations. First, from the Chinese perspective, it is instructive that Moscow's military buildup in Asia was occurring simultaneously with the opening gestures of normalization.<sup>22</sup> In other words, even though the Soviet military threat to China was increasing rather than diminishing, the Chinese were still receptive to Soviet diplomatic, political and economic initiatives.

Second, during the very period that Sino-Soviet relations were already improving, China stipulated the "three obstacles" to normalization. These "obstacles" included: (1) massive Soviet troop deployments along the Sino-

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<sup>20</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 9, 1989.

<sup>21</sup>. One Soviet aim in expanding Sino-Soviet economic ties is to tap Chinese resources, particularly labor, to develop Siberia. In 1988, China began exporting construction, logging and agricultural labor to meet shortages of workers in Siberia. In return, China seeks Soviet technology and materials for upgrading its infrastructure in heavy industry, primarily in the northeastern region of Manchuria. The Soviet Union has also agreed to aid China in building new thermal power plants, power transmission lines and electric railroads. The deepening of economic ties is also indicated by the Bank of China's recent (and inaugural) participation in a syndicated loan to the Soviet Vneshekonombank.

<sup>22</sup>. Steven I. Levine, "The Sino-Soviet-American Triangle Under Gorbachev," (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2, 1988). Much of the material in the next few paragraphs has been inspired by Levine's insightful analysis.



Soviet border; (2) the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and (3) Soviet support for Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea. As is well-known, Beijing continuously stressed that improving Sino-Soviet relations would not be possible unless the Soviet Union acted to remove these obstacles.

For China, the three obstacles have been useful for advancing several foreign policy aims. First, by regularly invoking the three obstacles China has been able to regulate and control the pace of normalization with the Soviet Union. Second, China has been able to use the three obstacles to suggest to the world that, despite the improvement which had already taken place in relations with the Soviet Union, China still opposed "hegemonic" international behavior in its lofty, "principled" foreign policy. Finally, the three obstacles calmed American fears about Sino-Soviet detente. Pursuing domestic economic reform, Deng needed to ensure market access and the continued flow of U.S. capital and technology. Washington obliged both Chinese and Soviet foreign policy by interpreting the "obstacles" as virtually insurmountable barriers to what Washington viewed as an unwanted normalization of Sino-Soviet relations.

Viewed in this light, the three obstacles were not barriers to better relations with the Soviet Union. Rather they were a framework created by China, and reluctantly accepted by Moscow, within which normalization could be pursued and regulated while other goals of Chinese and Soviet foreign policy remained unharmed. In other words, by the time Gorbachev had independently decided to adopt a political approach to containing the U.S. in Asia, significant changes had already occurred in the trilateral relationship. Quietly but effectively Beijing and Moscow had already covered much of the ground toward rapprochement. Of great importance to

China, this had been accomplished with no apparent cost to its relationship with the United States. This feat was immeasurably helped by the timing of China's response to the Soviet overtures: the process of Sino-Soviet accommodation was begun while US-Soviet relations were still openly hostile. Neither the Soviet Union nor China was prepared to acknowledge the substantial convergence of interests that had occurred. Indeed both countries, especially China, "sought to camouflage the political character of the rapprochement."<sup>23</sup>

From the beginning of his tenure as General Secretary, Gorbachev has actively sought to build upon and enhance Sino-Soviet detente. His landmark Vladivostok speech in July 1986 is perhaps the most famous of Gorbachev's gestures to China.<sup>24</sup> It is worth recalling that in that speech, Gorbachev reaffirmed Soviet acceptance of the median-line principle for the disputed river boundary in the far east, indicated the prospects for enhanced Soviet-Chinese economic cooperation, offered to consider removing Soviet troops from the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders, and announced a small withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan (an announcement which the State Department dismissed as a "ploy").

In other words, Gorbachev was quite willing to go some distance in mitigating Chinese perceptions of a Soviet threat and fears of encirclement by the Soviet Union, perceptions which had formed the basis of Beijing's apparent tilt toward Washington. Indeed, Gorbachev's July 1987 decision to

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<sup>23</sup>. Manning, *Asian Policy*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup>. In 1986 Moscow additionally signalled the importance it placed on improving its relations with China by assigning to Beijing one of its most experienced diplomats, Oleg Troyanovshy, a former representative to the United Nations and to Japan. *New York Times*, September 30, 1988.

eliminate completely Soviet SS-20 missiles in Asia as well as Europe both removed a barrier to improving political relations with regional actors and earned considerable credit with Beijing for further reducing the Soviet threat. The announcement by Gorbachev in his December 1988 address to the U.N. General Assembly of even further troop reductions in Mongolia was both an indicator and a forceful signal to Beijing of Moscow's determination to press for completion of normalization in relations.

Indeed his announcement that a "major portion of Soviet troops" deployed in Mongolia would be withdrawn was an important sign of the virtual elimination of the prospect of military conflict between the Soviet Union and China. Moreover recent actions by Mongolian authorities are illustrative of the quiet harmonizing of Sino-Soviet relations that had been underway for quite some time. In contrast to earlier Mongolian fears of Chinese hostility, during the last two years leaders in Ulan Bator have vigorously pursued better relations with Beijing having concluded a new consular treaty, an agreement on handling border problems, agreements on cultural exchanges, scientific and technological cooperation and a railway protocol.<sup>25</sup> It is very unlikely that Mongolian authorities would have concluded these agreements in the context of significant or rising hostilities between China and the Soviet Union.

The Soviet courtship of China, including flattering China's sense of great power status, is an ongoing component of Moscow's diplomatic sparring with Washington. After each of the primary Reagan-Gorbachev summits, Gorbachev dispatched his top Asian advisor, Deputy Foreign

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<sup>25</sup>. *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1988.

Minister Igor Rogachev, to Beijing to brief the Chinese. These meetings, in turn, are part of a larger process of consultation recently agreed to by Beijing and Moscow whereby high-level officials will meet on a regular basis to resolve their differences over Indochina, the Korean Peninsula and other regions.<sup>26</sup>

The hectic pace of all of these political initiatives was capped by the successful visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen to the Soviet Union in early December 1988. For the first time in 30 years, China's Foreign Minister met with his Soviet counterpart in Moscow. Although Kampuchea and the other two "obstacles" were key issues in the talks, the ground was in fact being prepared for the May summit between Deng and Gorbachev. In exchange for Soviet assurances that significant pressure would be put on Vietnam for a withdrawal of troops from Kampuchea—and an implicit admission from Moscow that ties to China are more important than links to Vietnam—Gorbachev received Chinese agreement to a Summit in the first half of 1989.<sup>27</sup>

The December meeting also included scheduling high-level discussions between Chinese and Vietnamese officials. For the first time in over nine years, in January, 1989, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Dinh Nho Liem met with his Chinese counterpart, Liu Shuqing and later with Chinese

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<sup>26</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 1989.

<sup>27</sup>. In a statement timed to coincide with the arrival in Moscow of Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Vietnam announced that 18,000 troops would be withdrawn from Kampuchea between December 15-21, 1988. This represented the last of 50,000 troops Hanoi promised to withdraw in 1988 in a partial pull-out of its forces. *New York Times*, December 2, 1988.



Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.<sup>28</sup> At this meeting a negotiated compromise was apparently worked out whereby Vietnam would concede the full withdrawal of its troops from Kampuchea while China would apparently drop its demands for a Kampuchean government of “national reconciliation.”<sup>29</sup>

Having achieved an agreement in principle for a Summit, it remained for Shevardnadze to travel to Beijing in early February, 1989 to fix a date for the meeting between the top leaders.<sup>30</sup> In exchange for this date, Shevardnadze brought with him Hanoi’s confirmation that it would indeed withdraw from Kampuchea under the plan that Beijing and Hanoi had negotiated in January. From the Soviet perspective, the Kampuchean issue is best seen as a means to the larger end of a Summit. Indeed, while in Beijing, Shevardnadze indicated that one of the purposes of his visit was to secure agreement on the topics to be discussed at the May summit. Indicative of Moscow’s purpose in so ardently pursuing detente with China, the Soviet Foreign Minister noted Soviet interest in discussing not only Sino-Soviet issues but the much broader questions of Asian security and disarmament, a topic Gorbachev has pursued in a dogged if one-sided manner since 1986.<sup>31</sup> However from China’s perspective, Shevardnadze’s confirmation of

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<sup>28</sup>. *New York Times*, January 20, 1989.

<sup>29</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1989. See below pp. 30-33 for an assessment of the implications of this agreement for resolving the Kampuchean conflict.

<sup>30</sup>. *New York Times*, February 2, 1989.

<sup>31</sup>. For an insightful analysis of Soviet arms control proposals for Asia, see Masahiko Asada, “Soviet Security and Arms Control Initiatives and Objectives in the Pacific,” paper presented at The University of British Columbia Conference on Maritime Security and Arms Control in the Pacific Region, May 19-21, 1988.

Vietnam's agreement to withdraw provided Beijing with the long-sought symbolic recognition of China's increasing authority: Moscow has apparently sacrificed the interests of its Vietnamese ally for better relations with China.

Even as relations between Beijing and Moscow are now being capped by the Summit, both sides continue to argue disingenuously that closer bonds between them will not harm their relations "with other powers." Indeed in a move reaffirming China's determination to scuttle any American unease, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Tian Zengpai recently used a press conference in Beijing to dispute the grandly positive interpretation that Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze had been placing on cessation of difficulties with China.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless as Soviet relations with China have steadily improved, Chinese relations with the United States have slowly deteriorated. In fact at times recently Sino-American relations have been characterized by fairly open hostility, notably over Chinese missile sales to the Middle East and Chinese policies in Tibet. Of some note, on both of these issues the Soviet Union has remained virtually silent. With the Soviet Union and China completing their normalization of relations, the enduring divisions between the United States and China have come in to sharper relief. Indeed the weakening of a shared perception of a Soviet threat has exposed fundamentally opposing values between an individualistic, democratic and pluralist America and a collectivist, statist and authoritarian China.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32.</sup> *San Jose Mercury News*, February 5, 1989.

<sup>33.</sup> Levine, "The Sino-Soviet-American Triangle Under Gorbachev," pp. 18-19.

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that with the cessation of ideological polemics, there are few serious value conflicts between China and the Soviet Union analogous to those between the United States and China or between the United States and the Soviet Union. In fact the parallel reform programs undertaken by Beijing and Moscow, wherein both are attempting to reform socialism within an ongoing Leninist political structure, creates a bond of shared concerns as the leadership in both countries face similar sets of problems. Thus a new convergence between China and the Soviet Union is not only conceivable but probable as their domestic reform programs unfold.

Western observers should not be surprised by this convergence for it was powerfully signalled two years ago during Zhao Ziyang's visit to Eastern Europe. China's then acting secretary of the Communist Party and premier voiced sentiments highly congenial to both Moscow and the leadership of the Eastern bloc countries he visited. For example, in Poland, where Western leaders had been seeking to reverse the disillusionment in Solidarity over the slow pace of their fight for more freedom, Zhao expressed Chinese "admiration and satisfaction" with the actions of Polish Party and Government in returning the country to the "proper" path of development. In East Berlin, where demonstrations were occurring against the Berlin Wall, Zhao warmly praised the durable German Democratic Republic leader, Honecker, for his efforts to make "dialogue happen in Europe." In the more Westernized Budapest, Zhao is reported to have reminded his audience that the Chinese were waging a resolute fight against the "misleading ideas of bourgeois liberalism." Moscow too had reason for satisfaction that detente with China was both progressing and would yield significant political benefits as Zhao used his 1987 tour of Eastern Europe to speak against the spread of the arms race to space, in favor of banning all nuclear weapons, against their

first use, and in favor of nonnuclear and peace zones.<sup>34</sup> All of these statements correspond very closely to Gorbachev's agenda since 1985.

Zhao's visit to Eastern Europe was in effect a return call for several Eastern bloc leaders had already journeyed to Beijing in 1986, most notably East Germany's Honecker and Poland's Jaruzelski.<sup>35</sup> These mutual visits indicated that *over three years ago* considerable convergence of interest already existed between Eastern Europe and China on the desirability of narrowing their ideological differences through establishing better political as well economic ties. This is quite noteworthy for it is most unlikely that either Honecker or Jaruzelski would visit Beijing without the prior approval of Gorbachev. In other words, unlike his predecessors who feared closer ties between Eastern Europe and China, Gorbachev encouraged these links and used them as additional avenues of influence and communication with Beijing.

While both China and the Soviet Union seek Western technology and capital, it is most unlikely that either will see much merit in adopting Western economic and political models. Given China's longer attempt at reform, Chinese experience is perhaps instructive for Beijing has deliberately slowed market-oriented reforms in an effort to "rectify the economic order"<sup>36</sup> and ensure continued political control by the Communist Party.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34.</sup> Further details of Zhao's visit may be found in *Christian Science Monitor*, July 8, 1987.

<sup>35.</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, October 21, 1986.

<sup>36.</sup> Recently Chinese authorities have moved to reestablish detailed central controls over the economy in an attempt to "rectify" a wide range of economic problems including sharply rising prices, excessive growth, panic buying, bank runs and differing rates of



One observer has recently concluded that the intensity and breadth of Sino-Soviet relations suggests that ideological differences between the Soviet Union and China have “evaporated” and that ideology has now become an important “unifying force” between the two countries.<sup>38</sup> Another observer points out that both countries are “natural allies” in the mutual effort to breathe life into poor and repressive societies.<sup>39</sup>

While the significance for global politics of this profound change toward ideological harmony between China and the Soviet Union is only being tentatively addressed by analysts and decision-makers, the change itself has been facilitated in part by Gorbachev’s promotion of the idea of “socialist pluralism” rather than Marxist universalism.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the apparent Soviet recognition of national variations of socialism within the context of “absolute independence” between socialist countries addresses significant past Chinese fears about the domineering embrace of Moscow. Although most observers have devoted considerable time to speculating about the impact of Gorbachev’s revisionist views on a *loosening* of Moscow’s tight grip on Eastern Europe they have virtually ignored the impact of his views on *closer* Soviet ties with China.

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growth between more and less regulated parts of the country. *New York Times*, October 28, 1988, and *The Economist*, November 12, 1988.

<sup>37</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, November 30, 1988.

<sup>38</sup>. Manning, *Asian Policy*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 1989.

<sup>40</sup>. *New York Times*, December 7, 1989.

One effect of all of these notable political initiatives is to make foreign relations in the Asia-Pacific much more fluid than they have been in the recent past. Not only does this fluidity affect Sino-Soviet politics but also the foreign relations of other states, including the United States, which had premised their policies on an enduring Sino-Soviet split. In this respect, it must be emphasized that if there was a direct connection between the Soviet threat to China and the geo-political shift of China to the United States, as many have claimed, then we should anticipate that reductions in the Soviet threat to China should provoke a similar shift by China away from the United States. To the extent that Moscow is mainly concerned with the "American problem," then promoting such a reorientation by China must be viewed as a top priority with the benefits far exceeding any costs.

Given the wide range of Sino-Soviet consultations on global and regional issues that has already occurred, and the diminishing convergence of interests between the United States and China on many of these issues, Western policy-makers should be alert to the growing evidence that Sino-Soviet detente is eventually likely to include overt military cooperation. Soviet initiatives in Northeast Asia, and China's favorable response to them, already indicate the broad outlines of a mutual arms control regime between these two powers. Moreover, as Moscow has found elsewhere, the transfer of military technology to China may well be an effective means of reestablishing links to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Recent events, including the prospective settlement of the Kampuchea conflict on terms agreeable to China and the widespread multi-dimensional improvement of Sino-Soviet relations, serve to enhance the prospects of renewed military ties. Initially these military links are most likely to include exchange visits and naval port calls, as part of a series of steps carefully calibrated to minimize their impact and

thus avoid alerting the United States, Japan and other Asian nations.<sup>41</sup> The prospect of renewed Sino-Soviet military cooperation does, of course, raise troubling questions concerning the desirability, nature and extent of ongoing transfers of American military technology to China.<sup>42</sup>

Gorbachev has made Sino-Soviet relations the centerpiece of his Asia policy, the success of which throughout the Pacific depends on accommodation with Beijing. Indeed the warming in Sino-Soviet relations has significant consequences for U.S.-Soviet-Chinese trilateral relations and is a major factor shaping the global balance of power. In this respect it is noteworthy that Soviet and Chinese security perceptions have already begun to converge on the issue of Japanese rearmament. China is no longer encouraging Japan to increase its defense capabilities to counter the Soviet military buildup in Northeast Asia and China no longer praises the enhancement of US-Japanese security ties. Instead the Chinese have joined the Soviets in expressing alarm about Japan's efforts to improve its military posture. Indeed Chinese fears of a resurgent Japan provide an additional incentive for rapprochement with Moscow. In fact it may reflect both China's diminished sense of threat from the Soviet Union and China's growing sense that in the future Japan is likely to be its major rival in East and Southeast Asia. The Soviets are of course playing on these Chinese fears of Japanese militarization.

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<sup>41</sup>. Of some interest in this process, Chinese troops along the Sino-Soviet border recently hosted their Soviet counterparts at festivities marking the 61st Anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 1989. This is a further indication that border tensions and conflicts have been significantly reduced, if not eliminated.

<sup>42</sup>. A succinct statement of conflicting views in the United States on the sale of American military equipment and technology to China may be found in the *Wall Street Journal*, May, 5, 1986.



Although U.S policy-makers have reacted to Sino-Soviet detente with equanimity, part of this public posture is designed to avoid giving any additional leverage to either China or the Soviet Union in dealings with the United States.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, US concerns do exist especially given the new options now available to Beijing and Moscow to redirect large numbers of troops and other military material formerly devoted to the Sino-Soviet border. For example, China may well feel free to become much more involved with all of Asia, certainly Southeast Asia, now that tensions along its northern borders have been greatly reduced.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the Soviet Union will have greater military resources that could be redirected against Japan and against US forces stationed in Japan. The desirability of making even a tentative assessment of these new options indicates the profound impact on the regional and global balance of power arising from Gorbachev's successful pursuit of detente with China.

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<sup>43.</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1988.

<sup>44.</sup> The most likely site of significant new conflict in Southeast Asia is the group of islands and reefs in the South China Sea known as the Spratlys. Although not given much coverage by the American media, both Vietnam and China have already fought repeatedly over possession of these petroleum-rich and strategically placed islands. Indeed Vietnamese Gen. Tran Man Cong has commented that "most ships passing between the Pacific and Indian oceans go between the (Spratly) islands and our mainland. The islands are like an unsinkable battleship.... China could build up the reefs and threaten Vietnam by placing medium-size missiles there." (See *Christian Science Monitor* June 14, 1988.) Of course, Vietnam would not be the only possible target for this threat capability. Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and China claim all or portions of the Spratlys. Moreover, little attention has so far been given to the ultimate significance of the Spratlys for interdiction, or threatened interdiction, of the tremendous maritime shipping that passes around them, making control of these islands almost as advantageous as control of the Straits of Malacca.



## II. Soviet Initiatives in Southeast Asia

It is most useful to consider Soviet interest in Southeast Asia during the Brezhnev era as a function of Moscow's global strategic concerns and priorities. Fearing a Sino-American military alliance, Soviet global planners could readily see significant political, military and strategic advantages from acquiring base facilities in Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Soviet interest and intrusion into the region following Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea should be seen largely as a product of Soviet policy toward China, particularly the Soviet goals of encircling and intimidating China. Moreover the strategic leapfrog to Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang was also part of the Soviet military and political challenge to the United States. As the U.S. appeared to be in retreat in Southeast Asia in the 1970s, Moscow's sudden appearance in Vietnam, especially the acquisition of former American bases in that country, provided apparent proof that the "correlation of forces" favored the Soviet Union and its ideological compatriots. In other words, Vietnam was used by the Soviet Union to challenge both China and the United States at a time when it seemed to many observers that a Sino-American political, economic, and military entente was close at hand.

Soviet interest in Southeast Asia has also been shaped by other Soviet priorities including Moscow's interest in the non-aligned movement and with key Third World countries such as Indonesia. The Soviets have long felt that tensions between the Third World and the West arising from alleged injustices stemming from colonialism to ever-present discord on trade,

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<sup>45</sup>. Winterford, *Assessing the Soviet Naval Build-up in Southeast Asia*.

technology and debt issues would induce Third World states to move in directions adverse to Western interests.<sup>46</sup>

Not surprisingly some incompatibility exists between these strategic, political and military objectives in Soviet policy. The militaristic approach characteristic of the Brezhnev era and graphically symbolized by the buildup of Soviet naval power in Vietnam had the perverse (for the Soviets) result of alarming Southeast Asian governments and further antagonizing China. Despite the suspicion that Moscow's actions have generated throughout Southeast Asia, the strategic alliance with Vietnam nevertheless:

- permits the Soviet Union to break out of its geographic and strategic encirclement in Northeast Asia,
- enables the Soviets to flank Japan's energy corridor through the Indonesian Islands;
- augments the sustainability of Soviet naval developments in the Indian Ocean;
- provides a possible counterbalance to U.S. bases in the Philippines;
- extends Soviet power-projection towards Australia;
- raises Chinese perceptions of vulnerability;
- counters any future Chinese submarine threat in the area;
- provides a Soviet forward deployment base useful in regional conflicts involving actors like China, Vietnam and ASEAN; and
- complicates U.S. naval planning in the region during crises (or possibly a general war)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46.</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, "The Third World in Soviet Foreign Policy, 1955-1985," in Korbonski and Fukuyama, *The Soviet Union and the Third World*.

<sup>47.</sup> Winterford, *Assessing the Soviet Naval Build-up in Southeast Asia*, pp. 16-17.

For all of these reasons it is unlikely that Moscow would adopt a strategy which carries a high-risk of losing access to bases in Vietnam. Nevertheless Gorbachev's recent initiatives in Southeast Asia indicate Moscow's determination to improve relations with China and other regional actors. He clearly recognizes that Moscow's military buildup in Southeast Asia has been successfully exploited by the U.S. in mobilizing an anti-Soviet coalition and that Soviet reliance on military might has further alienated the region from the Soviet Union. Consequently Gorbachev has reoriented Soviet policy to legitimize a new Soviet political, economic as well as a strategic role in the region. His multi-pronged strategy: emphasizes enhancing ties with non-communist states in the region,<sup>48</sup> seeks to erase Moscow's negative image,<sup>49</sup> encourages neutralist and anti-nuclear sentiment in order to reduce U.S. strategic access to the region,<sup>50</sup> and seeks to maintain the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>. While there may be little euphoria about Gorbachev in Southeast Asia, his initiatives have been making an impact. Gorbachev's new approach is particularly evident in Soviet relations with Thailand. Thailand is both the ASEAN state with closest relations with China and coincidentally one of only two Southeast Asian states with defense agreements with the United States. After Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's 1987 tour of Southeast Asia, Thailand's Foreign Minister visited Moscow followed by an unprecedented visit by Thai army chief of staff, Chaovalit Yongchaiyut, to the Soviet Union. Chaovalit is reported to have discussed not only regional concerns and Vietnamese military incursions across the Thai border but also the possibility of Thai military cooperation with the Soviet Union.

<sup>49</sup>. Indicative of Gorbachev's successful use of atrophied political and diplomatic tools, top-level Thai officials were soon followed by most of their ASEAN counterparts in similar high-level meetings with Soviet officials.

<sup>50</sup>. For a recent analysis of the one-sided nature of recent Soviet arms control proposals for Asia, see Asada, "Soviet Security and Arms Control Initiatives and Objectives in the Pacific."

<sup>51</sup>. While Western analysts have long grappled with the thorny issue of the extent to which Moscow can dictate terms to Hanoi, Zagoria comments that "Moscow does not want to risk eviction from strategically important bases in Cam Ranh Bay." See Donald S. Zagoria, "Soviet Policy in East Asia: A New Beginning?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 68, No.1 (1989), 120-138. On the surface, this would seem to give Vietnam the means for neatly

Indeed Southeast Asia is rapidly becoming a nexus of great power rivalry as the United States, Japan, China and the Soviet Union all seek to advance their national interests in this increasingly competitive arena. Although Washington may well prefer the removal of Soviet influence in the region, it is not at all clear that non-communist Southeast Asian governments still share American concerns over a Soviet threat. Indeed as Moscow gradually reduces its single-minded reliance on military power in favor of addressing regional political concerns, and perhaps enhancing trade with ASEAN, Washington may well confront a declining ability to forge and maintain its anti-Soviet coalition in the region.

One reason ASEAN is increasingly receptive to Moscow is the continuing fear of China. The reasons for this fear stem largely from China's contiguous location, its size, past support for local Communist Parties and the substantial ethnic Chinese populations in each ASEAN country. While some observers may see this factor as an element in Sino-Soviet competition in Southeast Asia, one must wonder if that rivalry is of any greater significance than U.S.-Japanese competition in the region. Indeed the selective fear of China in Southeast Asia may well help the Soviets without necessarily involving much cost to either Sino-Soviet or Soviet-ASEAN relations. China is there and ASEAN knows it is not going away therefore a Moscow with friendlier relations with China might well be seen in the region as better able to exert influence over China, moderating potentially hostile Chinese actions. This perception is even more likely to the extent that ASEAN governments

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countering the coercive influence that Moscow might have otherwise expected from its \$3 million per day subsidy of Hanoi.



accept the view that Moscow sees its chief rivalry in Asia as being with the United States not with China.

In this respect, the primary international issue on the ASEAN agenda is the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea and the formation of a moderate government of national unity in Phnom Penh. Ongoing attempts to resolve the region's most notable conflict are currently providing Moscow and Beijing with fresh glimpses of the types of foreign policy benefits they might anticipate from continuing Sino-Soviet detente. As part of its new political approach to the region, Moscow has now been playing an active role in brokering a settlement to this conflict. Nevertheless it is critical to recognize that this brokering role takes place within the context of warming Sino-Soviet ties and that the state of Sino-Soviet relations is the key determining factor regulating the nature and pace of the resolution of the Kampuchea conflict.

Placing Moscow's brokering role within the context of Sino-Soviet detente highlights recent developments that do not appear to be entirely favorable for the preferred ASEAN/Western solution to this civil war. Regional and western observers have been assuming that the broad outlines of a Kampuchean settlement would include (1) a phased withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in tandem with the cessation of external assistance to the belligerents; (2) a U.N. peacekeeping force for an extended period of time; (3) the establishment of a neutral coalition government; and (4) internationally supervised elections. However it seems that the Sino-Soviet summit in May is going forward based only on a Vietnamese withdrawal of troops and Chinese assurances of a phasing out of its support for the

resistance forces.<sup>52</sup> In other words, at the present time there do not appear to be any Soviet guarantees for an internal settlement among the various fighting factions. Nor does it seem that China will necessarily compel a provisional four-party coalition government headed by Prince Sihanouk.<sup>53</sup> Without that internal settlement, the Vietnamese-installed government can be expected to continue the war against the anti-regime coalition. Briefly, Sino-Soviet detente has crafted what Australian Foreign Minister Evans refers to as an “external settlement” without addressing an internal solution to the Kampuchean conflict.<sup>54</sup> As there does not seem to be any requirement for Moscow to pressure Vietnam to ensure a government of national reconciliation, Sino-Soviet detente may mean that the resistance has lost considerable leverage in its quest for a coalition government.

It is important to note the primary beneficiaries of this apparent Sino-Soviet external settlement. First, China would appear to have one of its chief demands met—the removal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. Second, China has forced the Soviet Union to acknowledge publicly that relations with China take precedence over ties to Vietnam. Third, the Sino-Soviet accord on Kampuchea has opened an avenue of communication for Vietnam with China, potentially diminishing overt hostilities between the two countries and

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<sup>52</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1989.

<sup>53</sup>. With agreement on Vietnamese withdrawal, China may continue to pressure the Soviet Union for such a political solution but it is unlikely to do so with much vehemence. Of course, it is possible that an acceptable internal political settlement might emerge from the May Summit.

<sup>54</sup>. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1989.

possibly reducing Vietnam's threat perception along its borders with China.<sup>55</sup> Fourth, Vietnam may find that Kampuchean Prime Minister Hun Sen is not required to share power with other national groups thus preserving Vietnam's considerable post-withdrawal influence in Phnom Penh.<sup>56</sup> Fifth, the presence of Soviet military forces in Vietnam does not appear to be part of a Kampuchean settlement and is unlikely to be affected in the near future. Sixth, even half of a settlement is likely to enhance Soviet stature both in the region and globally, lending credence to Moscow's new image and legitimacy to Soviet determination to be included in regional affairs. It must be emphasized that these "benefits" are a direct result of Sino-Soviet detente and consequently should alert regional and Western decision-makers to the potentially damaging ramifications of the warming ties between Moscow and Beijing. Finally, it remains to be noted that in all of these developments Washington has been a conspicuously minor player, having ceded the initiative to others in a region where not long ago the U.S. was viewed as a "king-maker."

Even an external settlement of the Kampuchean conflict promises to alter the geopolitical terrain in Southeast Asia. Once an accord is concluded it will be increasingly difficult for the United States to continue pressing for Vietnam's isolation. Indeed, China is most unlikely to continue as Washington's active partner in containing Vietnam. Consequently, the end of

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<sup>55</sup> Especially in light of the agreements reached in January, 1989 during meetings in Beijing between Vietnamese First Deputy Foreign Minister, Dinh Nho Liem, and ranking officials of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. *New York Times*, January 26, 1989.

<sup>56</sup> Recent reports indicate that at the second round of peace talks in Jakarta during February, 1989, the Kampuchean factions remain deeply divided over the form of any interim government and the nature of an international peacekeeping force to monitor any agreement. *New York Times*, February 17, 1989.

Vietnam's isolation will open the prospect for Hanoi's large-scale economic and political involvement not only in the region but also with Japan and other Western countries.<sup>57</sup> Of course this might mean a *long-term* diminution of Soviet influence in Vietnam as Hanoi finds its pressing needs met elsewhere. By the same token, Vietnam's integration into the region might dilute Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. In that respect, it is not at all certain that a more independent Vietnam, increasingly a participant in regional affairs, will be perceived by China to be in its national interest. Detente with the Soviet Union might thus be considered by Beijing as perhaps one way of exercising indirect influence over Hanoi. For the United States, Vietnam's successful interaction with ASEAN is most likely to alter the tenor of that organization and compel a reassessment of the range of possible American policy options. For example, with the end of Vietnam's isolation as a consequence of a settlement in Kampuchea, Vietnam will be in a position to stimulate neutralist and anti-nuclear sentiments in the region. Minimally, Hanoi will put a significant brake on any American hopes that ASEAN will become a collective regional defense organization in partnership with the United States.

### III. Implications for US Policy

President Gorbachev has made determined efforts to improve relations with European and Asian countries. Recognizing that the Soviet Union is a Euro-Asian continental power, he has effectively stressed to Western European publics that Europeans and Soviets all share a *common home* while

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<sup>57</sup>. Hanoi regards U.S. recognition as the linchpin to break its political and economic isolation which was imposed by the West and China after Vietnam invaded Kampuchea ten years ago. The primary factor compelling Hanoi to seek better ties with the U.S. is the desperate state of Vietnam's economy. In order to revive production, Vietnam is in critical need of foreign capital and technology.



he also vividly reminds his Asian audiences that the Soviet Union is an *Asian land power*. In both instances evocative Soviet imagery seeks to undercut American presence and influence by consistently emphasizing Moscow's geographic imperative and America's geographic isolation. Perhaps the most prominent feature of Gorbachev's foreign policy is then not novelty but continuity--Moscow still seeks to drive wedges between the U.S. and its friends and allies. The hallmark of Gorbachev's policy activism is his determination to use political, diplomatic and economic means rather than only brute military might to accomplish goals. The most significant result to date is the landmark rapprochement with China.

The success the Soviet Union has already attained in Asia is indicative of the challenge confronting U.S. policy-makers. In significant respects, the balance of power in Asia may have already shifted, and still be shifting, in ways unfavorable to the United States. Most notably, Washington can no longer take for granted enduring Sino-Soviet hostility. This does not mean that the West should expect a return to the tight political and military alliance between Beijing and Moscow characteristic of the 1950s. Nevertheless, in conceiving of foreign policy as offering a continuum of possibilities rather than an either-or choice, it is likely that Beijing and Moscow will continue to work ever more closely together in a widening range of areas. This must impact U.S. interests in Asia. At the same time, it is unrealistic to expect that Sino-American relations can remain unaffected by the profound changes in Sino-Soviet ties. After all, Soviet foreign policy is guided by Soviet global policies and priorities, the centerpiece of which remains the "American problem."

Although Sino-Soviet detente heralds the most significant challenge to American dominance in the Pacific in decades, other events are also posing new challenges and offering new opportunities to the United States. On balance, they suggest that U.S. policy in Asia in the 1990s is unlikely to be as successful as it was in the 1980s. A number of trends are coming together, some of which have been examined in this paper, which are mutually reinforcing and which collectively may substantially undermine U.S. security planning in the region. For example, the Vietnamese are withdrawing from Kampuchea yet Vietnam is still likely to control Indochina with troops remaining just over the border. ASEAN is likely to end its relative isolation of Vietnam, integrating Vietnam into regional economic and political affairs. While this holds the potential for a more peaceful region, it must also be recognized that Vietnam's influence in Southeast Asia is bound to increase in ways unfavorable to the U.S., for example strengthening those forces already disposed to neutralism and anti-nuclear sentiments. In other words, the U.S. confronts even greater pressure on its strategy of forward deployment. Indeed the United States should anticipate much more difficulty in maintaining even a loose alignment of states in the region.

Moreover, the prospect is closer at hand for a *fundamentally* adverse shift in the balance of power through the reinforcing impact of (1) Sino-Soviet detente, (2) Sino-Soviet security cooperation, (3) China's continuing efforts to develop a blue-water navy, and (4) a more assertive Soviet Union offering an alternative type of leadership to a loose collection of non-aligned states.

As Manning has observed:

The first step in safeguarding U.S. interests is recognizing that the Soviet Union has become a major player on what previously had been

an American home court. This dramatically reduces the American margin of error and increases the need for enlightened activism. A complacent or defensive U.S. approach runs the risk of losing the initiative and permitting the Soviets greater opportunity to shape the political environment.<sup>58</sup>

The foundation for Manning's "enlightened activism" should be a clear recognition among American decision-makers that the anti-Soviet coalition forged by the U.S. in Asia, consisting of the United States, Japan and China, has been severed. Not only is the balance of power shifting but "the American spell over East Asian diplomacy is broken"<sup>59</sup> giving the Soviet Union a freedom it has not enjoyed for decades to conduct its Pacific policy.

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<sup>58</sup>. Manning, *Asian Policy*, p. 92.

<sup>59</sup>. *The Economist*, June 11, 1988.





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